ON PAGE Sect 6-7

CHICAGO TRIBUNE
21 September 1986

Perspective

The textbook Soviet spy

Zakharov style typical, but he pushed too hard

By Nicholas M. Horrock

WASHINGTON—Gennady Zakharov was what FBI counterintelligence agents call a "cowboy"—a "free spirit," as one government man put it—who liked to innovate, to go a little further than the book. But there were some rules even he didn't break.

So, as he inspected the packet of secret United States documents his young Guyanese contact had brought him one day last month, he also checked to make sure there was a written receipt for the $1,000 he carried to pay off the spy.

"The KGB has its problems, too," the expert noted in recounting the incident. "Their operatives have drinking problems, all sorts of difficulties, so they keep a tight rein on the money."

A few moments after assuring himself that "Birg," the young Guyanese he had been cultivating as a spy since April, 1983, had brought the receipt, Zakharov suddenly was surrounded by FBI agents and on his way to becoming part of a diplomatic confrontation that may thrust the world's superpowers back into icy antagonism.

At 39, Zakharov, U.S. officials claim, was a highly trained Soviet intelligence officer, sent to the U.S. for one purpose—to spy. His cover was to be one of the 492 Soviet citizens who work at the United Nations Secretariat, supposedly just another member of the approximately 1,000-strong Soviet community in New York.

Arkady Shevchenko, a former undersecretary general of the UN who later became the highest-ranking Soviet official ever to defect to the U.S., has said about half that community is engaged in espionage for the KGB, the main Soviet intelligence agency, or for the GRU, the Soviet military intelligence apparatus.

In a way, Gennady Zakharov's story is a textbook example of Soviet espionage in the U.S. and the way spying in the Cold War can dangerously interrupt the most fundamental discourse between the U.S. and the USSR—the search for a way to end the threat of nuclear annihilation.

American security services have ample evidence that virtually all visitors, diplomatic and otherwise, from East-bloc countries are potential espionage agents, and they estimate about one-third of these persons actually perform some intelligence work while they are in the U.S.

But the UN Secretariat is a sort of extra liability, as one former FBI agent says, because no other country plays host to an international community of this kind beyond the usual corps of diplomats, businessmen and journalists present in most large nations. So for more than a decade, the FBI and the CIA have urged political administrations to limit the potential security threat posed by the UN's employees.

Earlier this year, the Reagan administration for the first time moved in a practical way by demanding that the UN missions of the USSR and two of its constituent republics, the Ukraine and Byelorussia, be reduced in size. Last week it based its expulsion order against 25 Soviet officials on Soviet failure to comply with this demand. But the U.S. government has no direct control over the international civil servants who work at the UN.

Zakharov arrived in New York as one of those civil servants in 1982, a physicist assigned to work in the UN Center for Science and Technology for Development, an office that is designed to encourage development in Third World countries.

As soon as he arrived, U.S. agents began a routine process of trying to determine whether he was an intelligence officer or simply a Soviet doing his job. "Sometimes we already know from the guy's background or because the CIA has identified his activities elsewhere," one FBI man said. "Other times we spot it here."

Zakharov started "trolling almost immediately," trying to spot and engage persons who might be useful agents. Indeed, U.S. sources said, he had several contacts on the string and others had reported his approaches but did not want to work as double-agents.

At the same time the affable young Russian had to maintain his cover of a UN employee. He, his wife, Tanya, and 12-year-old daughter, Irina, rented part of a two-family house in the Riverdale section of the Bronx, an area where many Russians live either in a six-acre Soviet government compound or in several special buildings. For all intents and purposes, his landlord has told reporters, he was a friendly, television-watching, chatty man who took occasional trips to the country and seemed to treasure his time with his wife and daughter.

To FBI surveillance teams, he was an aggressive intelligence officer dipping heavily into his UN work time. Shevchenko, whose deputy at the UN, Valdik Enger, was arrested on spying charges in 1978, has said that the KGB activities often made Soviets at the UN almost useless in their legitimate work and that many departments where they served were severely crippled in their operations.

Among Zakharov's "secret" contacts was a young man from Guyana whom the FBI has code-named Birg, or CS in court documents, a third-year student majoring in computer science at Queens College.

Slowly and patiently, Zakharov reeled Birg in. He asked him to provide innocuous things, easily available from libraries, then to steal unclassified materials from his job at a Long Island firm that did non-secret defense work. Zakharov taught him tradecraft, procedures for meetings to avoid surveillance and emergency signals.

In meeting after meeting, replete with signals and wave-offs in Queens and Brooklyn, Zakharov swept Birg into the world of espionage and gave him "thousands of dollars," according to court documents. He said that the institute, his name for the Soviet entity for which he worked, would even send Birg to graduate school.

Zakharov, far from being a dabbler, was at the very cutting edge of Soviet spying because he was going after technological developments, the developments that have kept America's defenses ahead of the Soviet Union's for four decades.

And he was operating in the patient manner of Moscow, shooting for the long-haul, the delayed reward. In May, 1986, he convinced Birg to sign a 10-year espionage contract, a tried-and-true KGB device designed to solidify the relationship between intelligence officer and spy. Until August, Zakharov was operating in a manner common for the KGB officers at the UN.

Since these persons do not have diplomatic immunity, they are more often used, some counterintelligence experts argue, as "spotters," whose job it is to recruit agents. Then members of the New York consulate or staffs of the Soviet embassy in Washington take over and "handle" the spy, knowing that if they are caught, their diplomatic immunity will protect them from prosecution.

Continued

But Zakharov, FBI officials say, seemed very eager as his five-year tour ended to score a coup, and he pushed his agent to obtain secret information. Of course, he did not know Birg was working for the FBI as well, and with their help the student got the secret materials. This opened the way for Zakharov's arrest.

Months earlier, the FBI had informed the U.S. intelligence community that it was on to a Soviet spy in New York. As Zakharov's activities intensified, the FBI took the elements of the case to John Martin, chief of the internal security division at the Justice Department, who cleared them to proceed.

Well before the actual operation that resulted in the arrest was carried out, the key American government figures were notified, Martin said. Among them were Adm. John M. Poindexter, President Reagan's national security adviser, as well as appropriate officials in the CIA, the State Department and the Defense Intelligence Agency.

"Nothing came back saying, even hinting at, 'Don't go forward' for foreign relations, intelligence or humanitarian reasons," Martin said. He and most other national security officials believe the arrest had full approval at the highest echelons of the government.

When Martin is asked whether the arrest of Zakharov was prudent at a time when the U.S. and the Soviet Union are in the delicate negotiations of arranging a superpower summit, he argues that it was the Soviets and Zakharov that really set the schedule.

"Anyone who said that it was the American action that interrupted the rhythm of the summit planning is dead wrong, because it was the Soviets who set the timetable. It was the Soviets who decided that during the summit preparations they would continue their espionage activity as intensively as before. It was not an American action that disrupted it, if indeed it has been disrupted. It's the Soviet action."